DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 362 899 CS 214 085

AUTHOR Resnick, Paul
TITLE Multiculturalism in the 90's: Teacher and Student Perspectives.
PUB DATE 8 Oct 93
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Midwest Regional Conference on English in the Two-Year College (Madison, WI, October 7-9, 1993). For a related paper, see CS 214 086.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Community Colleges; Course Descriptions; *Cross Cultural Training; Cultural Awareness; Foreign Countries; Foreign Culture; *Professional Development; Student Attitudes; *Teacher Attitudes; Two Year Colleges
IDENTIFIERS English Teachers; *Illinois Central College; *Mesoamerica

ABSTRACT

This informally written, first-person account describes the self-education in multiculturalism of a community college English instructor, telling in detail how he broadened his knowledge and understanding in preparation for teaching a 16-week course on Meso-America. The instructor, a generalist by profession, began by working with a mentor to design the course syllabus. The instructor received a grant from his institution, Illinois Central College (ICC) to spend six weeks in Mexico, three of them at the Spanish Language Institute in Cuernavaca. His stay gave him an aesthetic appreciation for a culture much different from his own. The course developed out of these activities focuses on the Mayans and Aztecs; historical periods from the original encounter with the Spanish to the Mexican Revolution and the Mexican Revolution to the current Central American crises; Meso-American artists; social structures; politics; and a variety of other areas. Surveys were sent to students who had taken the first-year Chinese culture class taught at ICC to discover how they had changed from their course experience. Twenty of the 31 students who returned surveys indicated that the course had changed their perspective. Some students also indicated that they were more aware of stereotypes and misinformation about China. Students, writing in their journals for the course on Meso-America, preferred to write about how the course is being taught rather than discussing course content and writing their impressions of it. Issues that still need to be considered about teaching non-Western or third-world cultures include: which cultures should be studied; how to persuade faculty members that multiculturalism is not a fad; and how professors can change their attitudes about other individuals, groups, or societies. (RS)

ED 362 899

Multiculturalism in the 90's:

Teacher and Student Perspectives

written by Paul Resnick, English Instructor

Illinois Central College

for the Midwest Regional Conference on English

Madison, Wisconsin October 8, 1993

CS214085

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

P. Resnick

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Multiculturalism in the 90's:

Teacher and Student Perspectives

Time was running short. I was supposed to give a 75 minute lecture to my students over Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz. I looked forward to my lecture while at the same time dreading it: "What was I going to say?" I thought. "I don't even know her myself!" Well, I did know about her semi-autobiographical work entitled "La Respuesta." I knew she was the first feminist in the Western World, dating back to 16th Century Mexico. I knew she became a nun, entered public debates with Catholic priests (a big no-no at this time, and maybe any time) and that she stressed 2 themes in her poetry and prose: women should be equal to men and women have a right to be educated. Other than that, I was lost on what else to say.

My first stop was to the ICC library, where our life-saver head librarian lead me to a 2 volume biographical set titled LATIN AMERICAN WRITERS. Now Armed with Sor Juana's biography, a pirated copy of "LA RESPUESTA," a collection of Sor Juana's poems from a Mexican poetry book edited by Octavio Paz and, lastly, some lecture notes I had from my Mexican summer course, I was ready to begin my odyssey. After 5-6 hours of reading, annotating, and

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

generally cramming, I felt as ready as I could ever be to discuss Sor Juana.

And thus you have one small glimpse into the life of someone teaching a multicultural course. As you can tell from my story, I am no expert in Meso-America. I know enough Spanish to pretend a lot and speak even less. But that has not deterred my college from putting me on the multicultural road. As a community college teacher, I am a generalist by profession. This semester is typical for me: 4 composition classes, an overload class titled "Novels into Film" and our new International Studies 132 course titled "The Societies and Cultures of Mexico and Central America." Though composition has always been my central focus, my college wanted me to change to fit the needs of our students in this ever-shrinking world.

Given the case of Sor Juana, I realized that there was too much to know about her and not enough time to know it in. As is typical for me, and possibly you, the day-to-day is all, next week is a blur and, if I try to get some perspective on my day-to-day well, forget it. It ain't gonna happen. I find it easy to use the word "overwhelming" to describe teaching a 16 week course on Meso-America. But for now, I'm just thinking about Tuesday's lecture notes.

Even though I do not know how I'm changing, I can tell you what changes have occurred in my life since PREPARING for this course. In the next few minutes I would like to

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

discuss with you my professional development, my trip to Mexico, some faculty perspectives and some student opinions to last year's course on China.

When Leanne first approached me, I basically knew next to nothing about Meso-America. Leanne did know, however, that I was and am interested in other cultures. I had studied in Ireland for one month, had toured England 2 summers in a row and had travelled the European continent. I've made many friends from other cultures and in general it was this interest which "qualified" me to be a candidate to teach on Meso-America.

After saying "yes," little did I know what I was getting into. One year ago this fall, Minta and I met with our consultant, Dr. Jim Alstrum from Illinois State University. He helped us design a 16 week course syllabus and truly focused us on important readings and how to structure the course chronologically. Without a mentor in these initial stages, we would have never begun so quickly. He focused us, gave us direction, and let us borrow a few of his books until we could buy our own.

Thus, in the Spring of this year I began my self-education. I began with 3 different accounts of the same event; that is, the destruction of the Aztec empire. I read the Aztec point of view in Miguel Leon-Portilla's BROKEN SPEARS. Next I read Cortes' FIVE LETTERS TO THE EMPEROR and Bernal Diaz's THE CONQUEST OF NEW SPAIN. I also

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

read Bartolome de Las Casas, Carlos Fuentes and Octavio Paz for good measure. The readings were fascinating. My education had begun and I was hooked.

During my self-education, Leanne encouraged me to apply for an ICC "Individual Development Project" grant. I applied and was awarded $1,000 to go to Mexico. I also applied for a Summer Fulbright Award, but was not accepted because my goals did not match the Fulbright qualifications. Still, with the ICC award, I enrolled in the Spanish Language Institute in Cuernavaca, Mexico, which has ties to ICC.

I was thus off to Mexico and decided to spend about 6 weeks there from June 24 until August 3. My only exposure to Mexicans prior to my trip was next to nothing. I don't know if you'd classify 5th grade playground fights with Alan Cooper as wonderful cross-cultural experiences. I don't know if you'd classify stumbling across a Mexican fiesta in downtown Davenport, Iowa as another cross-cultural experience. In any case, my exposure was no exposure.

I did know, however, that I loved challenges, that I was going alone, that I knew a few Spanish words, that I was going to the largest city in the world, and that I didn't know anybody in this city. I decided to spend 3 weeks in Mexico City at the Casa de Los Amigos which, I later learned, was a studio for the great Mexican artist Jose Clemente Orozco. I met people from all over the world, went

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

to all the museums I could find and basically tried to soak up a "feel" for Mexico City.

From there, it was on to Cuernavaca where I lived with a Mexican family, took language lessons from 8 to noon and then from noon to 2 took lecture notes (in English) on Mexican history, art, and social customs. I found the lectures invaluable to gaining a perspective on Mexico. After 3 crash-course weeks in Cuernavaca, I spent a weekend in Oaxaca and then it was back to the states. While in Mexico, I read 2 Miguel Asturias novels (Men of Maize and El Senor Presidente), Mariano Azuela's The Underdogs and some Juan Rulfo short stories.

As with visiting any country, I think that getting a feel for the place is the most valuable. The pace, the people, the sounds, the colors, and the activities prove to be vital learning experiences. Here is a typical journal entry of mine while in Mexico City, dated Sunday, June 27:

"Today I went to this huge park. Thousands of people were just walking around in an easy going atmosphere. Couples held hands, were kissing, and there seemed to be lots of touching. For some strange reason, these guys had snakes and they'd cut what looked like a beet and then squeeze it in their hand, spilling beet juice on their hands as if it were blood. They always attracted the biggest crowds. I later learned they were modern day medicine men discussing cures for this or that ailment. I saw many other vendors, a few clowns and generally people everywhere.

"In one area of the park there were hundreds of people watching a rock/salsa band. I just saw a sea of black hair and brown skin. I felt color conscious and I stood out like an anglo big-time. There is no doubt I'm a minority here. I think that means nothing to them, though."

October 8, 1993

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

I could go on and on about my 6 week Mexican sojourn; suffice it to say that this trip has helped me to teach the Meso-American class, not in any quantifiable way, but in an aesthetic appreciation for a culture much different than my own. In addition, I learned I had many negative stereotypes of Mexicans even before going down there. These stereotypes had become ingrained in me over the years. Thankfully, these stereotypes were stripped away, buried under a mountain of first hand knowledge.

This opposition between first hand knowledge and stereotypes intrigued me. Questions arose in me such as: What happens when we allow stereotypes to replace first hand knowledge? What happens to us when we're left with our stereotypes? Why do we rarely challenge stereotypes without analyzing them critically? These were questions I was forced to consider. I came back from Mexico proud that I had survived, humbled that I knew so little about our Southern neighbors, satisfied that my stereotypes had been destroyed, and challenged to spread the word to my students, colleagues, family and friends.

And what is this word I want to spread? Tolerance? Acceptance? Understanding? Appreciation? Self-Education? Maybe a bit of all of these. Concerning education, the challenge -- the eternal challenge -- is to somehow find that illusive key to unlock these code words into ourselves as well as our students. In the Spring 1993 Illinois

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

English Bulletin, Asian-American Lawson Fusao Inada describes how she had to become self-taught about her own Asian-American heritage. She writes that:

> "Unless a person is extremely fortunate, or in a very unusual institution, he/she would never be officially instructed about jazz, Frank Chin, Karen Yamashita, and the camps. You know what I mean: These things are "Extra-curricular," and you've got to spend your own time and money to teach yourself about them. Which is to say: You've got to teach yourself about your own country and its wonderful, multi-cultural culture." (Inada, 9)

I find this quote interesting because not only do we fail to teach our own children about their multi-cultural heritage, but we also neglect to teach them about other cultures. The course I team-teach does not consider Hispanic-Americans, South Americans and Carribeans. We focus on the Mayans and Aztecs, the Encounter, the Colonial Period, the Mexican Revolution, the Central American crises, Meso-American artists, social structures, politics, and a variety of other areas adding up to our course title "The Societies and Cultures of Mexico and Central America." This title is a mouthful and the course content is even wider in its scope. This depth and breadth shows both weaknesses and strengths of our course. We try to present the expansiveness of this region's cultures while occasionally dipping into specifics to highlight main points we want to make. Above all, we attempt to pull Central Illinoisians out of their parochialism and present differing perspectives on this thing we call life.

October 8, 1993

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Brooks McDaniel, an ICC professor of philosopher, told me his first approach to teaching the Chinese culture class was to try and show similarities between U.S. and Chinese culture. Then, the very next semester, he tried an opposite approach and decided to discuss how "utterly strange" Chinese culture was to our own and thus "listen to perspectives not our own and learn from that." Our approach to teaching about Meso-America is to present Indian and Spanish voices about each other and the world at large, including the U.S.

The real barometer for all that we do comes down to what is being filtered down to the students. How is all of our teacher preparation translating into real student gains? This summer Leanne and I sent out 70 surveys to last year's China students. Of the 70, thirty one were returned. From this survey, we wanted to know how students had changed from their China course experience. Therefore, from this question, 20 students responded "YES" it changed their perspective while 11 said "NO." Some of their "YES" responses included the following:

"I was not aware of the plight of women and the role the government plays in controlling the lives of the Chinese."

"It made me re-evaluate my misconceptions of the Chinese people that we are shown in the media."

October 8, 1993

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

One of the "NO" respondents said:

"Being in the military for 10 years and a ping-pong player, I pretty much knew a little about them."

Obviously, ping-pong diplomacy works!

Another survey question asked students if they've been aware of stereotypes or misinformation about China since taking the course. Here were a few responses:

"I can now either correct or elaborate for those who need help understanding (about China)."

"This course helped me to understand the Chinese way of thinking, their views and beliefs. If other people were aware of these beliefs they might not label or stereotype so quickly."

In still another survey question, we asked students how this class effects their lives today and we received some of the following responses:

"I am more aware of the importance of China's role in the global market economy."

"I try to read or watch any material about Asia, including China."

October 8, 1993

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

"I bought the award winning 'Big Bird in China' for my kids. They've learned a lot about China and a few Chinese words too."

"I still use the I Ching."

"I am learning to play MAH JONGG."

"We've become acquainted with a Chinese couple attending Bradley. He was very interested in discussing the course with me and was obviously pleased that I knew the general location of his province."

Our overall impressions of the student survey were that they knew little about China coming into the course, except as it referred to current events and politics. We learned they had not studied another country before; that their likes and dislikes of the course were typical -- ie -- they liked videos, but they didn't like the readings. And, most importantly, their horizons were broadened as a result of taking this course on China.

From reading student journals in our own Meso-American class, we have learned that students wonder how the Aztecs could sacrifice children before making war; the students both dislike and admire Cortez, and they are amazed at the present day poverty levels in Mexico and Central America. They think we assign too much reading and give too many lecture notes. They do not like having only 2 tests for the

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

entire semester and they still are learning how to use their journals. For some reason they'd rather write about how Minta and I are teaching rather than discussing course content and writing their impressions of it. In summary, our students seem to be experiencing normal stresses of a typical class, only this happens to be new and untried territory for all of us.

On Tuesday I discussed the culture of the Mexican Revolution from 1910 to 1940. I enjoyed showing Diego Rivera slides and asking them what they saw in his murals. Mexican painters Orozco, Siqueiros and Tamayo were also discussed. Swirling around the room were the names of Mariano Azuela, Juan Rulfo and Frido Kahlo. Cardenas, land reform, Zapatistas, Villistas, Carrenzas and Jose Vasconcelos somehow made it into the discussion. Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz seemed far away.

Before ending my discussion, I think it appropriate to consider a few questions we still need to consider about teaching Non-western or Third World cultures:

1) Which cultures do we study? Are some cultures more important to study than others? How do we choose which cultures to study? Should it be solely non-Western and/or Third World Cultures? Why not study Western European cultures and even Canadian culture? Can parts of the U.S. be considered "Third World" and thus worthy of study?

October 8, 1993

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

2) How can we persuade our colleagues to begin or even maintain multicultural course offerings? How do we win over skeptical faculty members who may see "multiculturalism" as a fad? Is it a fad or is it here to stay?

3) How can we change our own attitudes now, today, about other individuals, groups or societies? Can we see as professors the intrinsic worth of our own endeavors?

I think a few of these questions need to be addressed in a candid, thoughtful, forthright discussion.

Thank you.

October 8, 1993

BEST COPY AVAILABLE